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Gerard Donovan's *Young Irelanders*: Looking for Home in the New Ireland

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Abstract

This article examines Gerard Donovan's representation of the new Ireland in his 2008 collection of short stories *Young Irelanders*. Spanning the past decade, Donovan's stories chronicle the strangeness of life in a country both familiar and utterly changed, as his characters' nostalgic introspection enhances the ironic contrast between the new landscape of a booming Ireland and their painful awareness of the fleeting nature of time ("Country of the Grand"; "How Long Until"). On the eve of the 2008 collapse, the new Ireland is a disillusioned avatar of hypermodernity. It is marked by a lost sense of place; cars have replaced the bicycles of former times as a symbol of Irish life, but they have also ushered a radically changed perception of the self in relation to the once familiar landscape of childhood memories and family life ("By Irish Nights", "Another Life"). America looms large in Donovan's evocation of lost souls on the road, driving aimlessly in search of an unattainable inner peace ("Harry Dietz", "Shoplifting in the USA"). Donovan's Irelanders are also lost in time: their present reality eludes them as they delve into childhood memories or strive to regain a sense of collective past ("The Summer of Birds"; "Archaeologists"). The characters' perception of the outside world, mediated by the artefacts of modern life, further enhances their isolation from other people and from their own former selves. Donovan's elliptic narratives focus on metonymic details to paint a fragmented portrait of the private and public spaces of the new Ireland, and to raise the question of memory and identity against a background of building sites mushrooming like so many question marks.

Keywords: Gerard Donovan, Celtic Tiger, nostalgia

Abstract

Cet article examine la représentation de l'Irlande à l'orée de la crise financière de 2008, dans le recueil de nouvelles de Gerard Donovan, Young Irelanders. *Donovan interroge le sentiment d'étrangeté de personnages confrontés aux paysages changeants d'une société agressivement triomphante et indifférente à son histoire. La question de la mémoire se traduit en termes de nostalgie et de fragmentation de l'espace et du temps ("Country of the Grand"; "How Long Until"): la « nouvelle Irlande » révèle le revers du néolibéralisme des années 2000 à travers la solitude d'individus pris au piège des nouveaux symboles de la vie moderne ("By Irish Nights", "Another Life"). L'imaginaire américain et la voiture omniprésente tiennent une place essentielle dans les évocations rêveuses de Donovan, dont les personnages se perdent sur la route en quête d'une quiétude inaccessible ("Harry Dietz", "Shoplifting in the USA"). Les récits de Donovan dressent ainsi un portrait fragmenté, hanté par la question du passé au moment où l'avenir économique du pays est de plus en plus incertain.*

Mots clés: Gerard Donovan, Celtic Tiger, nostalgie

Gerard Donovan's *Young Irelanders* (*Country of the Grand* in the British edition) paints a melancholy picture of the Ireland of success, fast cars, consumption and "money in the bank[1]". His collection of short stories was published in the summer of 2008, on the eve of the country's first fall into recession since the 1980s, and two short years before the 2010 IMF bailout plan. Today, the book's nostalgic tone might be regarded as a perceptive foreboding of what was to come, but Donovan's stories are not about the last days of the Celtic Tiger. They look beyond the dizzying rollercoaster ride of booming confidence and exhilarating wealth that repositioned Ireland on the global map, to reveal the loneliness of the ride. *Young Irelanders* unfolds the changing landscape of Ireland through the blurred perception of characters both lost in space and time, as the shock of the new gradually obliterates an increasingly elusive sense of the past. Donovan's characters long for an authenticity that they feel has been lost in the global language of economic wealth, and cannot be regained. The collection's American title significantly echoes the aborted 1848 rebellion of the Young Irelanders, thus providing an ironical counterpoint to the recurring theme of disenchantment and resignation throughout the stories. In "How Long Until", Peter cannot dispel his sense of unease as he quantifies his life's achievements: "four years married and both working with their own careers, doing well, money in the bank, shopping trips to New York" (30). Against fast lanes and cosmopolitan lives, endless traffic jams and sprawling urban developments, Donovan pits stories of nostalgia and loss, painting a universal portrait of human frailty faced with the end of love, bereavement, and the passing of time.

This article examines Donovan's disenchanted vision of Celtic Tiger Ireland through the jarring contradictions of a society torn between its buoyant new landscape and an enduring nostalgia. The country's changes are first perceived in terms of space: Donovan maps out the new Irish landscape with characters navigating a labyrinth of places once familiar but now utterly changed, in keeping with the pervading placelessness of hypermodernity. The instability at work in the landscape also attests to a new, ambiguous relationship with time. In the stories, characters are torn between the ubiquitous imperative to look forward and their own desperate urge to look back and retain the past. Uncertainty and nostalgia finally culminate in existential disillusion when characters realise that nothing is as it seems, and that the veneer of an easy life and material comfort only conceals their deep-rooted feeling of helplessness and solitude.

1. Gerard Donovan, *Young Irelanders* [published as *Country of the Grand* in the British edition], Woodstock and New York, The Overlook Press, 2008, p. 30. Page numbers are mentioned parenthetically in the text hereafter.

Lost in Space

The most striking feature in Donovan's stories is the shift of paradigm at the heart of his spatial depiction of the new Ireland: from a land of bicycles in the 1930s and 1940s, Ireland has become a nation of cars. As the symbol of both rural and urban Irish life for decades, the figure of the bicycle has so permeated Irish literature since the early twentieth century that a change in transportation – both in real life and in its literary representations – is of ground-breaking significance: more than technical progress and affluence, it points to a radical transformation of life itself. In his 1995 poem "Kings and Bicycles", Donovan evoked childhood memories at a crossroads in time, when fast cars were an attribute of the wealthy American tourist, and the first bicycles were still a vivid memory in the collective imagination.

> Growing up in Galway, I never thought about ancestry
> except when gentle foreigners stuck their heads out of expensive cars,
> asking directions to a town whose name they could not rescue
> from the neat pages of the tourist guides;
> and following my finger's gentle trace, they sailed down the boreen
> into the caress of lost fields, eternally optimistic in their search
> for a place just beyond pronunciation.
> […]
> I imagined the village crowd at the first bicycles –
> circling High Nellie, High Nellie by the gate or at full speed
> around every pothole and bump on the wet, brambly tracks[2] […]

In the poem, foreigners drive in search of an archaeological past. Optimism and exhilaration saturate their perception of the landscape: for them, being lost in space is a sailing adventure. Yet theirs is an irrelevant pursuit to the boy whose past is shaped by living memory, and whose sense of speed is attuned to the bumps and turns in the country tracks. In *Country of the Grand*, on the other hand, the shift from bicycles to cars comes with a radical change of scale, shrinking the whole country both in time and space as distances are now measured in driving hours, and Galway has become a weekend commute for fast-living Dubliners.

The first story in the collection, "Morning Swimmers", opens with a car: "In the first week of May, before the water in Galway Bay changed to a mild summer blue, Eric Hartman and John Berry drove to Jim's house and announced that they had gone swimming that morning" (9). Jim's memory of his childhood's swimming days is crucially associated with bicycles: "One man used to leap straight

2. Gerard Donovan, *Kings and Bicycles*, Dublin, Salmon Publishing, 1995, p. 12.

from the sea onto his black bike, cycling home instead to change, stopping wet on the way to buy a newspaper" (10). There is no break in time and space as the man transfers seamlessly from his swim to his bicycle ride and onto the social world of the newspaper agent. In Donovan's new Ireland, the trip has lost its adventurous edge: it is a casual drive in the comfort of a waterproof vehicle shielding morning swimmers from the elements. "Morning Swimmers" is a story of overheard conversations and broken heart. After he accidentally hears friends discuss his unfaithful wife, a lonely Jim retreats to his car. His solitary swim had made him one with nature as he "entered fully the green silence, opening his eyes to the salt and the waving seaweed, the fat tendrils' ballet in a slow current" (11). Once in the car, however, the protective bubble turns into a confined space, irretrievably shutting out the rest of the world.

The recurring theme of the car throughout the collection expresses the deep-seated solitude of modern life and echoes Marc Augé's anthropological analysis of supermodernity and placelessness. Augé examines cars as cogs in a network of non-places designed "for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself[3]". In this story, Jim's car reflects his profound isolation and painful self-examination: as he watches the distorted image of his friends' reflection through his rain-soaked windshield, he realises they have become strangers. Sadness and disenchantment follow in the wake of the monadic car-bubble in Donovan's new Ireland.

Much as bicycles were in previous periods, cars are now a staple of Irish life and a symbol of its newfound prosperity, as the advent of the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s ushered "the transition from communal transport solutions (such as walking, cycling, car-sharing between family-members and neighbours) to individualised, car-based mobility", together with "novel perceptions of time as accelerated, desynchronized and condensed[4]". Cars and motorways alter people's socialising practices and crucially transform the country's landscape to the core, as much as they affect our perception of time. Augé insists on the symbolic significance of motorways as non-places whose very existence relies on a contradiction: "Motorway travel […] avoids, for functional reasons, all the principal places to which it takes us[5]." Besides spatial disruption, individual car travel causes a break in interpersonal communication, as real-life interaction is replaced by the ubiquitous mediation of texts via advertising boards and instruction signs. "How Long Until" illustrates the effect of globalised supermodernity in Celtic Tiger Ireland.

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3. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 79.
4. Henrike Rau, "Environmental Arguing at a Crossroads? Cultural Diversity in Irish Transport Planning", Ricca Edmonson & Henrike Rau (eds.), *Environmental Argument and Cultural Difference*, Oxford/Bern, Peter Lang, 2008, p. 100.
5. *Ibid.,* p. 97.

The story is mostly set in the confines of a car and follows the tense conversation of a couple driving from Dublin to Galway for a holiday weekend. While the story suggests that Galway has now become a habitual destination for busy Dubliners, there is no liberating speed on the road. As his car is stuck in an endless traffic jam, Peter can only "brak[e] his way forward" (26) and the stalling car mirrors Peter's realisation that his relationship is falling apart. The couple's tense dialogue, further exasperated by the frustratingly slow drive, expresses the feeling of entrapment and helplessness pervading the whole collection together with a stifling sense of claustrophobia. "How Long Until" sees a relationship disintegrate within the confines of affluence and comfort. Ironically, cars and the liberating luxury they stand for fail to deliver on their promise of freedom and speed. In this regard, Donovan's collection contrasts with other literary depictions of contemporary life such as Alan Gillis's poem "Rush Hour" which tells of cars zooming past "at death-force speed" in a halo of "fumes, windscreens and chrome gleam[6]". In her 2007 novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, Éilís ní Dhuibhne describes Dublin's light rail service, the Luas (Irish for "speed") as a mechanical embodiment of the Celtic Tiger[7], reflecting the common idea, since the early twentieth century, that speed is "the mechanical soul of modernity[8]". On the contrary, Donovan examines the deceptiveness of speed and its distorting effects on our perception of the world. In "How Long Until," Peter's thoughts are triggered by a roadside advertisement prompting him to ask the question that will unravel his relationship. His view of the landscape is reduced to punctual visual stimuli, and he only takes in his whole surroundings once he has come to a complete stop.

> He pulled into a parking space and glanced out the window: the hotel, a restaurant, petrol stations in a strip, the rest was night.
>
> This place, he thought, could be marked as loneliness on a map. Galway had spread in the past decade, gushing for miles along the roads that led to it, pink and blue neon signs, huge hotels standing alone till more business built up around them, and then the rabbit-cage houses. (31-2)

Despite the obvious parallel with the great open space of the American landscape, there is no sense of elation here, only loneliness and the stifling, de-humanized "rabbit-cage houses". Donovan's cars are thus just one instance of the solitary bubbles of modern life, cutting through social and affective bonds as they drive across the homogenized architecture of generic suburbia, reminding us that

6. Alan Gillis, *Here Comes the Night*, Oldcastle, Gallery Books, 2010, p. 42.
7. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 2007.
8. Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera*, London, Sage, 1998, p. 184.

the country's integration into a global capitalist market has no liberating effect on the solitary, anonymous driver.

"By Irish Nights" gives us the same view from the driver's seat, through a nighttime drive that prompts the narrator's impersonal reverie. In this story, Donovan's ambiguous use of the third-person plural turns cars into full-fledged characters, as drivers have become one with their machine:

> But there are so many places and so many cars. Across the country, from Donegal to Tipperary and down to Kerry, the roads have begun to fill, coast road, roads through small towns, roads widening into the midlands, narrowing into cities, red signs, yellow signs, bump ahead, one hundred this, fifty that. So much to notice with a shoe on a pedal, a hand on a wheel, an eye on a road. (74)

Flann O'Brien's "mollycule" theory of the genetic connection between Irishman and bicycle is long gone, together with the friendly, sensitive two-wheeler of his time[9]. There is no poetic communion between man and machine here, no mysterious transfer of the soul, but the mechanical engineering of efficiency and speed. Drivers are no more than the sum of their parts: they are reduced to functional apparatuses, an eye, a hand, a shoe. The dehumanising effect of the drive further underlines the driver's estrangement from the organic reality of the earth. No longer are the soles of our feet on the ground – as in Paula Meehan's elegiac poem "Death of a Field": "to know the field/Through the soles of my feet", Meehan says, "before the field becomes solely map memory/In some archive of some architect's screen[10]." Where Meehan sings the end of an era, Donovan takes stock of an already transformed landscape. In Donovan's stories, Meehan's architect's screen surfaces as the omnipresent windshield, the crucial instrument to our new perception of the landscape and symbol of our existential outsideness – defined by geographer Edward Relph as the feeling of strangeness and alienation we experience in a new place[11]. As cars speed through the night, the landscape around them dissolves into a blurry haze: "they near the place and recognize the shape of the stone walls, the way the field and the sky distribute themselves generally. They continue because they cannot be late" ("By Irish Nights", 73). The urge to go forward is not so much about speed as it is about the widening chasm between the hurrying drivers and the timeless universe of field and sky they leave behind. A change in pace, then, means a change in space, and the landscape of the past gradually becomes a matter of archaeological and archival reports.

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9. Flann O'Brien [1967] *The Third Policeman*, London, Flamingo, 2001.
10. Paula Meehan, *Painting Rain*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2009, p. 13-14.
11. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London, Pion, 1976, p. 51.

Altered perception thus transforms the landscape and yields a pervading sense of uncertainty throughout the stories, leaving characters to wonder whether to question their senses or reality itself. "Shoplifting in the USA", the third story in the collection, shows how reality has been utterly transformed together with our perception of it, and hints at the tangible effects of cultural assimilation in a largely Americanized global culture. It depicts an Ireland of hard shoulders and American style supermarkets, with a deliberately misleading title – the story is not set in the United States but in Ennis – and geographically ambiguous opening: "Bob, the supermarket owner, was adamant this time" (41). Bob is the Texas-born owner of a small business planted at a crossroads "on the way to the airport: a lot of business from lost drivers buying a snack to ask a question" (44). The recurring theme of lost drivers in search of human contact underlines the sense of spatial isolation in a country now defined by fast-lane highways but struggling with the dehumanizing effects of hypermodernity. As in the rest of his collection, Donovan emphasises his characters' uneasy sense that they can no longer identify with the place they call home. Fintan O'Toole has noted that such dislocations are at the heart of Ireland's postmodern globalisation: "The diasporic life was now lived at home – a logical outcome of the economic reversal in which, instead of Irish labour moving towards American capital, American capital had moved towards Irish labour[12]." In *Country of the Grand*, foreign travel, airports and "shopping trips to New York" again remind us that the forced exile of bygone eras has been replaced by a close-circuit frenzy of travel consumption, in keeping with the rest of the post-industrialized global world.

"Country of the Grand" opens with a different place: a backward glance into the past, which derails the routine of successful solicitor Frank Delaney. The story's opening ironically debunks its victorious title, suggesting that fragility and self-doubt still hover over the men and women riding the Celtic Tiger:

> As he left the house that morning, Frank Delaney remembered being so young that he was not able to walk, struggling from his father to his mother, going soft at the knees and collapsing into her hands. This was the image that reached for him across almost fifty years as he stood at the door and snapped his briefcase shut. (55)

As his wife and colleagues discuss property development and investments in Spain and Poland, Frank Delaney feels the irrepressible urge to see his childhood home again. Frank's longing for the past and acute sense of loss translate as spatial inadequacy when he drives back to his old neighbourhood and does not recognise the house.

12. Fintan O'Toole, "Foreword", Eamon Maher (ed.), *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2009, p. xiv.

> He drove slowly up the hill and waited at a crossroads traffic light. Already he could see that the street had been widened, and when he stopped outside the low white wall of Number 5, he saw that the tree that used to be in the front garden was gone, along with the white and red geraniums he planted thirty-two years ago. The lawn was a concrete parking space with three cars angled into it. (56)

The faint echo of pastoral bliss in Frank's memory of the old house shatters over the harsh reality of concrete and metal, thus pitting the abundance of wealth, measured in numbers of cars outside the house, against the homeliness of a more human-scale sense of happiness. After he sees the house, Frank's anxiety turns to a panicked frenzy and he joins the compellingly capitalized "GALWAY CITY HOSPICE 8K RUN" (61) in his tailored suit and shoes, in a desperate bid to show his old childhood friend that "his running days are [not] over" (62). Frank's predictable failure in the race only reflects his own deep-rooted feeling that he has lost himself on the sidelines of his own life. After meandering back to his childhood house again, Frank finds himself "at the main road south to Galway, his thumb out for a lift to the passing cars that droned out of the night" (69). This brief moment of pedestrian helplessness echoes with Frank's recollection of his early walking days in the story's opening lines, but with a darker undertone, since his parents' supporting arms have been replaced with the ubiquitous car. Donovan's car-bound characters cannot feel the ground beneath their feet and have become commuting strangers in a strange land. The Latin motto, "*Ubi pedes ibi patria*" is particularly apt here to explain Donovan's depiction of his character's spatial disconnectedness with their surroundings. There is no resolution in "Country of the Grand": Frank comes home to a wife who turns away in bed, and lulls himself to sleep with the half-hearted hope that she loves him still, that "It [is] not too late" (72). In the story, Frank's longing for the past leads him astray, literally, as he loses himself in the sprawling landscape of suburban Galway.

Throughout *Young Irelanders*, the characters' pervading sense of disorientation and spatial disruption is a direct symptom of their ambiguous longing for times past. Donovan's subtle landscape of loneliness brings us beyond the surface cartography of ring roads and housing developments, and into the disorienting archaeology of the new Ireland.

Lost in Time

Donovan's characters are lost in time as much as they are lost in space, and the two are closely linked. While speed and time contraction distort our perception of the outside world, Michael Cronin notes that

> space is what happens to place when time tends towards zero. The less time a person has to dwell on what it means to live in a particular place, the more the place they inhabit becomes filled with the spatialised ubiquity of commodity advertising, ratings-driven media product and context-less information bites. Place becomes the site of the multiple surfaces of consumption, a tantalizingly fragmented space, detached from any longer term sense of what it means to dwell in and be responsible for a particular place and how the place might be positioned relative to others[13].

Our understanding of time, history and memory is therefore embedded in our perception of the landscape around us. In *Country of the Grand*, when the promise of high speed comes to a standstill at the obligatory rush-hour traffic jam, characters and readers are left to ponder the sedimented layers of history that make up the shape of the new Ireland. In "Archaeologists", two students at an excavating site struggle with their contradictory feelings about the new economy of the past that has taken over their academic field.

> The year before, a photo from a plane captured a swelling near the proposed petrol station and parking area off the new national road. A part of a pot was found in the ground not far from where the bog began. A private consulting company in Dublin won the license to excavate and hired the couple on the site as temporary summer archaeologists. (79)

The swelling in the road – a pathological rather than desirable growth – is symptomatic of an impediment to progress: like a cancerous tumour, it must be eradicated. In the story, the excavation in only barely tolerated by an irate foreman who constantly reminds them that time is, indeed, money. The archaeologists, Emma and Robert, have been hired to open up the site, report on their findings, and cover it up again so that building work can resume as soon as possible. The whole enterprise epitomizes neoliberal violence, with academic research led by private companies and contracted out to post-doctoral students, the prime targets of academic precariousness in the age of neoliberal higher education[14]. The excavation itself is subject to severe time constraints, and mostly aims at clearing out the landscape from the historical and material hurdles that slow down the course of ineluctable progress: "You excavate in no time and write a short report, stick the stuff in a warehouse. Why not share what we're finding with the public?

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13. Michael Cronin, "Inside Out: Time and Place in Global Ireland", *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 13, nº 3, Autumn 2009, p. 86.
14. Jason Del Gandio, "Neoliberalism, Higher Education, and the Rise of Contingent Faculty Labor", *Political Research Associates*, 15 October 2014, [*http://www.politicalresearch.org/2014/10/15/neoliberalism-higher-education-and-the-rise-of-contingent-faculty-labor/#sthash.4oOKo3Ep.dpbs*], accessed 20 January 2016.

We're digging them up and hiding them again" (95). For Emma, hiding the past goes directly against public interest and social cohesion, but she is up against an unstoppable force: "We can't stop the building, everyone knows that" (95). Not only is the construction inevitable, it is also accelerating "to meet the demands of the new economy" (94). Donovan's depiction of this economic fate puts Ireland within a global, post-industrial society of unrelenting imperatives, one that has fully internalised the Thatcherian slogan that "there is no alternative[15]". In this regard, his portrayal of Ireland on the cusp of recession is a universal portrait of our age. Yet Emma's questions about hiding the past also ironically echo the bureaucratic corruption and financial opacity that produced the specific brand of Irish neoliberal policies throughout the Celtic Tiger years[16].

In the story, two understandings of the past come head to head in the couple's strained relationship. The ambitious Robert is focused on his career and wants to settle into a comfortable, middle-class life; he diligently follows the rules of an institution in line with the new economy: "… the old Irish dug up from the ground, and now the new Irish were hiding them again, burying them in long, dark warehouses and reports" (97). Robert views historical research as just a means to his professional success, and he embarks into "the politics of archaeology" with conference papers "designed to say just the right amount of nothing" (94). Emma, on the other hand, is obsessed with displaying the discoveries of the past for all to see. She is a field archaeologist, the "Lady of the bog" (95): her tireless dedication to the excavating site echoes her longing for self-understanding and identity: "Yes, this was the dream she had, that when she dug through the bog she found herself" (92). The belligerent foreman embodies the inexorable demands of the economy: "Every day is a business day for me […] I have two machines and a whole crew waiting to build" (81-2). Time is money, but it is crucially understood in spatial terms. For Emma, fifteen minutes mean another two inches uncovered. Her slow, careful brush reflects her reverence for the long process of historical stratification that covered up the ancient tomb. The foreman's pressing "Where are we?" (81), on the other hand, betrays his utter inability to understand the depth and significance of Emma's meticulous efforts. Time is at stake in the territorial struggle playing out on the site: time lost – that of economic imperatives – and time regained, the archaeologist's obsession with finding herself.

For Emma, "an archeological dig is not a delay" (82) because the past is an essential, organic part of the landscape:

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15. Susan George, "A Short History of Neoliberalism", speech presented at the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalising World, Bangkok, 24-26 March 1999, [*https://www.tni.org/en/article/short-history-neoliberalism*], accessed 20 January 2016.
16. Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, London, Faber and Faber, 2009.

> We should recover the evidence and leave it where we find it, at every roadside stop, in each new housing development. Build glass cases and put the material in them, their knives, their pots, what they placed in their hair to keep it neat. Show how thousands of years ago, so many people lived here. […] And when you stand at those cases you can look around and see the same horizon. It would be so comforting. (98-99)

We relate to the past not through abstract reports but through our relationship with its concrete, physical traces. Those are inscribed in the living landscape of our daily life. The comfort of sameness that Emma longs for is a reassuring sense of identity, both in space and time. The unearthed artefacts transform places into sites of memory – following Pierre Nora's definition of *lieux de mémoire* – precisely because society has lost a sense of collective memory: history, as opposed to memory, "is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past[17]". Robert embodies the dispassionate management of the past, in keeping with the sanitisation of globalised Ireland described by Peadar Kirby: "Contemporary Irish identity has […] been sanitised and made remarkably accommodating to the dominant elitist project of subservient assimilation into multinational capitalism; robbed of reference points from a rich and subversive history[18]." On the contrary, Emma rejects the violent packaging of archaeological artefacts. Her deep-rooted, ecological and spatial sense of the past stems from a concern for living memory rather than academic history: "She preferred the dirt on her fingers, the smell of the bog" (95). These concerns are paralleled with her personal experience of loss and aborted pregnancy. Finding the inner chamber of the ancient tomb thus gives her the closure and wholeness she longs for:

> With one glance across time she saw the skull, the shoulders, the spine curled in two short strands that wove through shallow muck. A mother had cried for a long time after this child died. Three thousand years ago was yesterday: she was buried here, exactly as she lay. (107)

Emma sees a mirror image of herself in the ancient remains, as young and old become one. The commanding presence of the past finally halts the battle between old and new when the three characters stare in silent awe "as the brown and mute bones of the Young Irelander moved in and out of the dark" (108).

In "Archaeologists", the past literally shapes the body of a country, and there is no erasing its traces: they are layered in a poetic archive that reports and warehouses cannot match. Donovan raises the question of history to show how his

17. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", *Representations,* No. 26, 1989, p. 8.
18. Peadar Kirby, "Contested Pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger", Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, Michael Cronin (eds.), *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, London, Pluto Press, 2002, p. 27.

characters' acute consciousness of the new is integral to their longing for the past. The bones and fragmented remains of "Archaeologists" are one instance of Donovan's Proustian fondness for the objects and pictures that trigger involuntary memory. Unlike the commoditised artefacts of global consumer culture, Donovan's symbolic objects of memory bring us closer to an essence of the past: the mirror reflections in "Another Life" and "Glass" and the coming and going of birds in "Summer of Birds" offer visions associated with bittersweet childhood memories, fleeting happiness and the end of innocence.

Like the first-person narrator whose mother has left the family home in "Summer of Birds", most characters come home to the realization that they have been deluding themselves about their own lives. In "Country of the Grand", Frank's solicitor colleagues rejoice that "things have never been better", thus echoing an official view of the Celtic Tiger years as "the best of times" relayed by President Mary McAleese in a 2003 official speech in the United States: "It is as good [a time] as it has ever been[19]." Yet Frank cannot dispel his growing sadness: "he wanted to ask if anything in their lives had ever disappeared when they weren't looking" (58). The race against time is a losing game, and Frank's failed attempt at joining the local run reflects the mix of self-delusion and melancholy awareness pervading Donovan's stories.

> A race steward waved and shouted something about no spectators being allowed in the race as Frank turned into a lane that ran parallel to the river for about five hundred yards before veering back into the connecting fields, where the slow runners ahead were already turning in a sleek line. He made it halfway down the lane and slowed under a stitch like a blade in his side. […] As Frank ran through the gate that led from the river back to the fields he knew that he could not run to the finish line. (64-65)

In *Young Irelanders*, characters can only come to terms with their sense of spatial and temporal displacement by confronting their self-delusion and denial, and Donovan's bittersweet portrait of the rewards and pressures of the new Ireland finally brings us to the disenchantment at the heart of modern life.

Disenchantment

Country of the Grand sheds light on the painful discrepancy at the heart of the Celtic Tiger. Even as it was feted and emulated until after its collapse[20], the "Irish

19. Quoted in Peadar Kirby, *Celtic Tiger in Collapse: Explaining the Weaknesses of the Irish Model*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, p. 50.
20. Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools, op. cit.,* p. 7-25.

model" was experienced at home as a socially, economically and culturally disruptive force; Peadar Kirby, among others, has documented the growing inequality and the emergence of the working poor in Ireland during the first decade of the millennium[21]. Celtic Tiger economy in turn affected people's everyday lives and social representations as culture became fully commoditised. Michel Peillon notes at the time that "most aspects of cultural activity and production are now so integrated into the post-industrial economy, either as a means of production or as a means of consumption, that the very possibility of critical stance is suppressed, or, more simply, not entertained or even imagined[22]". Suppressing explicit cultural consciousness has consequences: Donovan's tales of disenchantment show the pathological return of repressed individual and collective memory through his characters' spatial and temporal disconnectedness.

Fintan O'Toole commented on the difficulty of "writing the Boom" for Irish authors when "the emergence of a frantic, globalised, dislocated Ireland has deprived fiction writers of some of their traditional tools" among which he listed "a distinctive sense of place[23]". The anonymity of post-modern, globalized non-places was all the more pervasive as Ireland was hailed as one of the most globalised countries in the world in the early 2000s, and its apparent economic success advertised as a "showcase of globalisation[24]". Thus a "pervasive sense of fragmentation and unease […] was one of the corollaries of the country's newfound prosperity and economic self-confidence[25]". Donovan's title *Country of the Grand* takes on an ironical tone as his characters experience the inadequacies of a society whose core values have been indexed on economic growth. Most stories in the collection centre around a character's realisation that their material success only conceals the failure of their personal relationships, and that their blind acceptance of "the good life" has made them largely complicit in their own deception.

In "Another Life", a widow becomes aware of her late husband's infidelity when she inherits a house she has never seen. Coping with the heart-breaking discovery leaves her with a shattered sense of self, but she harbours no anger against her late husband.

> She woke before dawn in a parked car on a dark and empty street. The rain on the windshield delivered her waking thought, that Paul had

21. Peadar Kirby & Pádraig Carmody, "Moving Beyond the Legacies of the Celtic Tiger," *IIIS Discussion Paper* No. 300, 2009 p. 50-68.
22. Michel Peillon, "Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy", Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, Michael Cronin (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 52.
23. Fintan O'Toole, "Writing the Boom", *Irish Times*, 25 January 2001, [*http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/writing-the-boom-1.273557*], accessed 20 January 2016.
24. Nicola Jo-Anne Smith, *Showcasing Globalisation? The Political Economy of the Irish Republic*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005. See also Peadar Kirby & Pádraig Carmody, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
25. Liam Harte, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel, 1987-2007*, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, p. 8.

> a child with another woman and maintained a house that Mary did not know about. She leaned into her reflection and touched the cold window with her forehead and joined the old woman who lived in that hard, thin, rainy world of glass. Was she that old? He had divided his life in two. Would it have been better to know? She would not have been able to cope at all. (141-142)

Mary's emotions unravel in the confined microcosm of her car, echoing Jim's helpless despair in "Morning Swimmers". Yet her disenchantment comes not with anger but with resignation to a fate which has already been played out: "To win all that time from bitterness, where a broken heart might never win back its ease. She did not have the time not to forgive" (145). Donovan leaves us with an ambiguous sense of hope when Mary comes to terms with her husband's betrayal: "She would see what had been true in their lives" (145). The story's bittersweet irony suggests how close resilience is to self-deception when surviving a broken heart.

"Shoplifting in the USA" tells a similar story of betrayal. The first-person narrator, who has come back to Ireland and settled in Ennis with his American wife, learns that their relationship has been based on a lie: "finally I stole you. Remember your girlfriend Cynthia? […] I told her you had a disease" (52). The narrator's reaction is one of weary acceptance:

> Now here was the obvious: Heather had stolen my life. But I needed to go to the bathroom. So I switched on the light and stood over the bowl. Nothing came. I flushed the toilet anyway, went back and lay as far from her on the bed as I could manage and not fall off.
>
> Heather said, Did you remember to set the alarm? — Yes. — Okay. Goodnight then. — I waited for the rage. But the hour was late and I was tired. (54)

Here, resignation comes as a tragicomic anticlimax: there is no resolution to the character's traumatic awareness. Donovan's depiction of his characters' private lives meets the general disenchantment of a country losing itself in its economic success the better to forget what has been left behind. At the same time, some personal responsibility is at stake in the characters' refusal to fully confront the causes of their underlying depression.

Donovan's personal stories can be paralleled with the underlying logic of the Celtic Tiger, whose economic success was in fact entirely dependent on external, rather than internal factors. In 2009, Peadar Kirby and Pádraig Carmody commented that "what distinguishes the Irish economy from other so-called developed economies is its extreme dependence on multinational capital. […] For what we have at the heart of the Irish model is the entrenched power of foreign

capital and this limits severely the room for manoeuvre of domestic policy makers[26]". The structural contrast between superficial buoyancy and internal vulnerability is mirrored in Donovan's intimate portrayals through the characters' feeling that their understanding of themselves and others is out of joint.

When reviewing the collection, author Joseph O'Connor praised Donovan's ability to see the Celtic Tiger "for what it truly was, in all its shimmering newness and garish strangeness – its ugliness somehow related to its beauty". For O'Connor, *Country of the Grand* reflects the uncertainties of a society struggling to cope with the intensity and rapidity of change:

> Much more than a book about the Celtic Tiger […], this is a collection about the anxieties and sublimated fears of the Ireland that rejected the Lisbon treaty in June, despite being commanded not to do so by its establishment. There's a sense of having come too far, of something precious being lost, doing battle with a simultaneous and equally adamant mistrust of the past. Is Ireland European? A kind of America? Or both? What did the good years mean[27]?

Such questions are left unresolved in *Country of the Grand*, and only the last story brings a sense of peaceful closure to Donovan's collection.

In "A Visit", a middle-aged man pushes his wheelchair-bound mother from her nursing home all the way to town, along the main road. In these final scenes, Donovan's pedestrian character reclaims the road, thus ironically reversing the objectifying gaze of car-culture on the cars themselves.

> Another few hundred yards and the traffic thickened, people glancing out of their cars at this man pushing a woman along a road in a wheelchair, nothing but blank faces in glass fleeting by with glances that could be read in that instant, what this must be, what is happening, why is that woman on the road and who is that man and where could they be going; but they drove steadily on under the shifting cloud of the late afternoon sky, probably because others were following right behind. (219)

Here, Donovan makes peace with his initial theme of cars on the road, and brings together two generations, thus restoring the lost relationship between old and new and finally reconciling present and past. His characters have finally come out of their confined spaces – car, retirement home – to fully inhabit the open landscape, as the very act of walking reconciles them with place by situating them

26. Peadar Kirby & Pádraig Carmody, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
27. Joseph O'Connor, "Riding the Celtic Tiger," *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008, [*http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/09/fiction1*], accessed 20 January 2016.

existentially in space[28]. Donovan's collection had opened with "Morning swimmers"; it ends with a serene evening vision, thus completing our intimate visit of the new Ireland: "My mother faced west […] her face was calm, turned to the sun" (222).

Donovan's *Young Irelanders* draws a bittersweet portrait of the new Ireland through his characters' disenchantment and nostalgic longings. Donovan reveals the difficulties and contradictions of a country lost in its own intoxicating success, at a time when global integration disturbs the fragile balance between old and new and the past is increasingly hidden away. Haunting questions about past and present and a disrupted sense of place reflect the disjuncture between the reality of social and economic internal structures and the financial and political delusions of the time. The 2008 crash followed a worldwide rise in estate property prices that had been called "the biggest bubble in history[29]". In Donovan's "grand" Ireland, the bubble is also one of solitude and nostalgia.

Most of the stories in the collection are set in Galway, and, significantly, the book cover of the American edition shows a photograph of the diving tower at Salthill, with a solitary diver in mid-air. The sepia colours and the faded title, evocative of an old postcard, tie present and past into one, imparting us with the foreboding sense that the new, successful, booming Ireland is soon to become a picture of the past.

28. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 117.
29. "In come the waves", *The Economist*, 16 June 2006, [*http://www.economist.com/node/4079027*], accessed 20 January 2016.